**ON THE 32ND ANNIVERSARY OF MARTIAL RULE:**

# 19 Years After 'Bloody Thursday,' Terror Still Stalks Escalante

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**BY KARL G. OMBION**
***Bulatlat***

*Victims of the Escalante Massacre (left), reenacted recently (right)* **Right photo by Karl Ombion**

On the mid-afternoon of Sept. 20, 1985, tensions were high at the Escalante public plaza just 50 meters across the town hall as thousands of sugar workers, farmers, fisherfolk, students, urban poor, professionals and church people, carrying placards, some bamboo sticks, and chanting anti-government slogans were staging a protest in commemoration of the 13th anniversary of martial law. The protesters were tightly encircled by some 50 combat-ready Regional Special Action Forces (RSAF), plus local policemen, members of the Civilian Home Defense Force (CHDF), and unidentified armed civilians.

Minutes after the town mayor Braulio Lumayno, with former congressman Armando Gustilo and their armed bodyguards left the town hall, a volley of gunfire from automatic rifles and a caliber .60 machinegun suddenly burst. A few minutes after, the streets were littered with blood and scores of terrified protesters were moaning as they lay on the ground.

The shooting claimed 20 lives – their bodies found sprawled at the rally site and in nearby sugarcane fields. Thirty others lay wounded. A bank, concrete walls, and some houses in front of the town hall had bullet holes.

1985 was the year before strongman Ferdinand Marcos, who had ruled the country for 19 years, was toppled in February 1986. Nineteen years later, not a single victim or the surviving kin of "Escam" (short for Escalante Massacre, also known as "Bloody Thursday") has been indemnified.

Three low-rank policemen who were put behind bars later for their role in the massacre were released on parole last year. A ranking police officer in command of the RSAF unit was reportedly redeployed in other provinces and was recently promoted to the rank of senior superintendent. No local officials and other dignitaries present in the Bloody Thursday of September 1985 were ever summoned for investigation or trial.

**Scenic and stagnant**

Escalante is a small city in the northern tip of Negros, or 95 kms from Bacolod City. The town is popularly divided into the "old poblacion," the coastal side of the city, where it used to host the seat of power. Local legend goes that the old poblacion was originally known as "Manlambus," a Visayan word meaning "to strike with a club" because its coastal waters were then teeming with fishes that catching them could be done simply by clubbing. The new poblacion, known as "Balintawak," is the mainland side, made up mainly of sugar haciendas, and some small coconut and corn farms on the hilly portion.

Escalante became a city in February 2001, after 143 years as a town. Hosting some 80,000 Cebuano- and Ilonggo-speaking people, it faces the island province of Cebu and most parts of the Cebuano-speaking Negros Oriental.

Apart from its scenery, the other side of Escalante is a portrait of poverty and stagnant economy. Huge mansions of hacienda landowners are ringed by workers barracks and shanties. Small and decrepit makeshift huts appear like small canopies on hill farms and coastal villages.

Sugar is still the No. 1 contributor to the city's treasury. Sixty percent of the city's population relies on sugar farms as their source of income while the rest especially those in the old poblacion depend on fishing. A small section of the population depends on "*remedyo heneral*" – doing odd jobs for daily survival - and small merchant trading.

**Social injustice**

Only a few families control most of the sugar farms, other rich agricultural lands and the scenic beaches of the city. Leading them are the Barcelonas, one of whose members – Santiago Barcelona - is now the city's mayor; the Ballesteros, Javelosa, Yanson, Flores, Ponsica, Yap, Tolentino, Osmeña, Lizares, Montalvo, Alimani, Consing, Carol, Zamora, Lumayno, Benignos and Tan. These names have also dominated the city's politics for decades.

In the 1960s-1970s, widespread labor problems, landgrabbings and killings forced sugar workers to organize. Backed by progressive diocesan clerics and a group of foreign missionaries assigned in Escalante inspired then by the opening of the church after Vatican II, organizations of sugar workers emerged rapidly, networks and groups from other sectors sprouted and lent support to the poor. The social protest movement – a by-product of the First Quarter Storm – took shape to challenge the landlords' rule.

Inevitably in the late 1970s – or the early part of martial rule - until "Escam," Escalante was one of the heavily-militarized towns in the Negros region, with a regular army battalion and company-size RSAF based around the city, and reinforced by the several hundreds CHDFs (now known as the Citizens Armed Force Geographical Unit or Cafgu) and private armed goons.

"Virtually, every barangay (village) had a detachment," said a farmer in the old poblacion.

Sugar workers and church activists narrated to Bulatlat that in countless occasions prior to and after the "Escam," private armed goons, accompanied by regular army and CHDFs, "roamed the haciendas and barangays in full battle gear in broad day light." It was like "wild, wild west," said one.

Escalante then was always on the news headline - of children dying of acute malnutrition, cases of rampant landgrabbing, landlords' armed goons killing farmers, burning of villages, summary executions, rapes, and many other cases of serious human rights violations.

**Still in a climate of terror**

One of the massacre survivors, Toto Patuigas, now 57, who is also currently secretary general of the Northern Negros Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (NNAHRA), an affiliate of Karapatan, told Bulatlat that Escalante is the same Escalante he saw 19 years ago. The vast tracts of lands, beaches and sugar farms, he said, are still in the hands of the same old families. The same people enjoy the spoils of patronage political governance.

Although roads are better now, more beaches have mushroomed, new ports are being built, new businesses have opened, these have benefited only the landed elite and a few segments of the middle class, Patuigas said. In fact, most of these projects that the government of Mayor Santiago Barcelona touts, have been built at the expense of the poor people.

Patuigas mentioned how the Yansons, transportation giant owners of the Vallacar bus transit – which plies Visayas and Mindanao - opened a 14-hectare port in Barangay Washington, Old Poblacion, The port now threatens to dislocate more than 2,000 fishing and farming households.

He also slammed the Habitat housing projects in several barangays in the city, because "they result in land use conversion, and raises the price of lands." "Worse, those who cannot afford its higher costs, are ultimately dislocated," he added.

Pablito Plaza, a Pamalakaya leader-organizer in northern Negros, also hit the "destructive development programs" of the city, because, so he said, they both terrorize and dislocate the poor fisherfolk and peasants.

He cited the case of Jomabo island beach resort, some 10 kms off old poblacion, owned by a certain Jose Montalvo from Bacolod. He said, the city mayor granted Montalvo a permit to operate without any

environmental clearance from the DENR and public hearings. Now, he added, the resort is practically privatized, and the fishing families can no longer fish around the island resort, or could seek refuge whenever they are caught by bad weather at sea.

**Paramilitary groups**

Patuigas said that there are less army and RMG detachments in the city, but this did not diminish the climate of terror. More visible today, he said, are members of the paramilitary Revolutionary Proletarian Army-Alex Boncayao Brigade (RPA-ABB), CAFGUs, and several armed citizens groups like the Guardians, GUTS and the Bantay Escalante Movement for Peace and Development.

The groups, he said, operate with orders from the city mayor to conduct surveillance and peace keeping operations in the barangays.

In 2000, Tay Pedro Trabajador, a local NFSW leader was shot allegedly by members of the RPA-ABB. Patuigas and Pablito themselves together with several other members and organizers of NFSW, Pamalakaya, and even local church workers, have experienced cases of harassment and intimidation from these groups.

Will another "Escam" happen in Negros? Patuigas said that the "Escam" - whether big or small - is bound to occur in Escalante because "the socio-economic conditions and the political structures remain the same."

What the massacre survivors want, he said, is not only indemnification, but genuine social justice, lands, jobs, wages, housing, services, not only for the victims of the massacre but all those who have been victimized by state policies and programs.

On Sept. 20, NNAHRA, Karapatan and their allied organizations will commemorate the 19th "Escam" and martial law declaration by staging a cultural reenactment of the massacre in Escalante. Coordinated protest actions will be held on Sept. 21 in Escalante, Bacolod City, Guihulngan and Dumaguete City in Negros Oriental. **Bulatlat**